

The Asylum Street Spankers

S-S-Somebody Spank Me

by Al Kaufman

When the Asylum Street Spankers advertise themselves as playing "music the way God intended it," they mean acoustically, without any demon electricity whatsoever. But much more can be read into their motto. They play music they enjoy, with people they enjoy. Their show is a throwback to the vaudeville days of yore, chock full of blues, ragtime, jubilee gospel, country, and lots of kazoos. They play to entertain, pure and simple. And although they may incorporate more sex and drug references into their act than God might like, I prefer to think that God has a sense of humor. The Spankers are basically a group of great performers with even greater record collections who like to play forgotten songs from days gone by, as well as their unique originals. "We're just weird people from around Austin with whacked similar tastes," says the band's singer and resonator guitarist, Guy Forsyth. "There was so much great stuff recorded in the Twenties and Thirties. But commercial recording came and blanketed it all. Everyone started sounding like Glenn Miller."

Adds vocalist extraordinaire and ukulele player Christina Marrs, "When the Depression hit, nobody could pay all these small guys. It was just the big guys who got recorded." It's a mission of the Spankers to see to it that these little guys, such as the old jubilee gospel band the Golden Gate Singers, get their due. Well, that and to make sure that anyone who shows up to a show on their birthday gets a few whacks with a wooden paddle named Spanky. On Forsyth's birthday, he was smacked so many times that his butt turned black and blue. "We once had a volunteer from a women's shelter tell us, 'I do not pay to watch women get spanked,' says a straight-faced Forsyth. "I want to make this clear. It is not our intention to degrade, embarrass, or abuse anyone, unless they ask really nicely."

The Spankers came to be in the summer of 1994, but their origin dates as far back as 1991. That was the year Forsyth was busking in front of Quackenbush's (and prior to his fronting the electric blues band Guy Forsyth & the Real Deal), when a waitress came out to sing with him. Guy was immediately impressed with her Bessie Smith-like vocals, and a relationship was formed. Although Forsyth and Marrs are not romantically involved, their onstage banter resembles that of an old couple in which one is constantly trying to one-up the other. Marrs proves to be the constant foil for Forsyth's cheap sex jokes and thinly guised entendres.

Marrs sang with Forsyth a few times, both with the Real Deal, and when Forsyth played some acoustic gigs at Chicago House. But nothing came of it until they met a big burly poet named Wammo at Dabb's Hotel in Llano. They passed around an acoustic guitar all night. "Guy was in the Real Deal and I was in a band called W.O.R.M. that was like them [only] 10 times louder," remembers Wammo. "We were both bitching about how loud our bands were." They discussed starting an acoustic band back at Forsyth's house. "I said something like, 'Yeah, and I want to play something like a washboard.' Then Guy pulled this big washboard out of his closet." Wammo stuck some plastic babies' heads on it, and quickly became one of the more adept washboard players in the city.

After that, things moved quickly. Forsyth knew the ever overall-clad banjo and mandolin player Pops Bayless from Ken-Jutsu (sword) class, and Pops knew Mysterious John, an actor and impressionist who sings harmonies in the Spankers, plays kazoo, runs around with placards telling people when to clap and when to shut up, dances like a cross between Pee-wee Herman, a Peanuts character, and a cadet, and adds general ambiance to the whole thing. Forsyth also knew Kevin Smith, slap upright bass player for the rockabilly trio High Noon, from various acoustic fests, and brush snare drummer James Dean, who

had filled in for Rich Chilleri with the Real Deal occasionally. Recently, flat-pick guitarist Josh Arnson has joined the band to make up for the dates that lack Forsyth and Olivier.

It wasn't until later, before a show at the Electric Lounge, that Forsyth, MARRS and Wammo coerced French hunk and 8¹/₂ Souvenir, Olivier, to join them for a backstage jam. Olivier was hooked. "Olivier is just too good an acoustic guitarist to not be in this band," says Forsyth emphatically. And he is correct. As Mysterious John and Wammo run around the crowd soliciting words to rhyme in verses on "I'll Be Glad When You Dead You Rascal You," it's Olivier's gently amazing guitar solo in the middle that reminds you this band is more than a novelty act.

These people are all accomplished musicians, which is why other musicians - such as clarinetist Stan Smith - often join them on stage. It's also why they can afford to play without plugging in. "We filled in for the house band once at the Threadgill Sing for Your Supper thing," says MARRS. "Lots of local celebrities came in, saw we weren't using a PA, and ran like rats."

Then there was the time during one of their Wednesday night gigs at the Austin Outhouse. "The power went out," smiles Forsyth. "We just lit some candles and kept on playing. I bet we were the only band in the area that was still playing," he boasts.

Unfortunately, the band cannot play enough. Practically everyone is in another band. Pops and John are in the comical lounge band, Duckie Duncan & the Dunkineers, and MARRS has just formed her own blues band, Christina MARRS & the Speakeasies, which includes Stan Smith. When the Spankers had their Wednesday night gigs, Olivier used to go from a happy hour show at Continental Club with 8¹/₂ Souvenirs straight to the Outhouse. And because so many of their other bands play during the weekends, the Spankers are restricted to playing mostly Wednesdays and Thursdays. Even then, they've been forced to play shows without key members, such as the night back in June when Forsyth was on vacation and MARRS was called to a family crisis. People from the Jazz Pharoahs and 8¹/₂ Souvenirs filled in. "We called ourself 8¹/₂ Spanking Pharoahs that night," says Mysterious John, who found himself singing many of MARRS' parts.

Although Forsyth is considered the glue of the band, it's a title he shies away from. "If the Real Deal takes off, I'll spend lots more time with the Real Deal," he says. "The Spankers already exist as an entity. The electric band is what pays my rent. There's a commitment to that. That's the first project. I don't think you have to compromise anything. I just like doing radically different projects."

The band hopes to record, but because Forsyth signed an exclusive contract with the Real Deal, there are legal problems that must be tackled first. In the meantime, they are working on special live projects, such as a pajama party show, and an all nude show, with strategically placed instruments (MARRS will probably need a custom-made ukulele). There's also the upcoming Vaudeville Halloween show at the Electric Lounge, complete with skits, dances, and cigarette and hat check girls. Costumes from the Twenties and Thirties will be mandatory.

In the meantime, they're just happy doing what they do. "I get to play with some of my favorite musicians in Austin," says Forsyth., "These are people who entertain me. Sometimes I just sit back and watch." n